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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Al-Hakim Foundation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

1. On the occasion of the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Al-Hakim Foundation, which represents a large proportion of the women of Iraq, would like to extend its best wishes to all the delegations that are participating in the session.

2. Al-Hakim Foundation is committed to working for collective human security and sustainable peace in cooperation with civil society and the relevant Government and international parties, including those within the United Nations. The Foundation would like to work with others in all parts of the world towards replacing the culture of armed conflict with a culture of peace where racism, discrimination, economic oppression, violence and all types of subjugation are unknown and where women may enjoy opportunities for full participation on a basis of equality with men.

3. While most countries, including Iraq, have made progress with regard to girls' primary education, there is a continuing need for efforts to be made to maintain and reinforce those gains by ensuring that the laws which provide that education should be both free and compulsory are applied and by dealing with such common problems as the lack of basic facilities in schools, parental lack of awareness of the importance of girls' education and the problem of poverty. The financial difficulties of their families, particularly in the current global economic crisis, lead to many girls being deprived of educational opportunities.

4. The Foundation believes that in order to make progress in this regard, it is important to create a close partnership between national Governments, local authorities and civil society. On the basis of that principle, and believing as it does that general access by girls and women to all levels of education is a fundamental condition for the advancement of women, Al-Hakim Foundation has, since 2003, promoted an extensive educational process in Iraq, through its schools and education institutes, which have provided thousands of Iraqi girl students with the opportunity for education from the primary to the advanced academic levels. It has also run literacy courses in various parts of Iraq.

5. While we appreciate all the efforts that are being exerted by the United Nations and States Members to empower women and allow them to achieve equality and exercise all their freedoms and rights, we should like to point out that a woman's freedom to choose clothing that is consistent with the teachings of her religion and her beliefs is one of the most basic, legitimate rights of every woman.

6. Al-Hakim Foundation, which is one of the biggest civil society institutions in Iraq, through the various activities of its Department of Women's Affairs, consistently endeavours to educate Iraqi women, protect their rights and give them appropriate opportunities at all levels. It also conducts a variety of programmes that are designed to provide poor women with material support. It has a particular interest in supporting widows, of whom there are many in Iraqi society. Foundation programmes also aim to assist Iraqi women in confronting a range of challenges, the most significant of which include violence and domestic violence.

7. Violence against women has become a serious global phenomenon which affects every society in the world, including Iraqi society. It is a phenomenon that is abhorrent to all religions, laws and the conscience of mankind.

8. As part of the international campaign to eliminate violence against women that was launched by the United Nations Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, on 25 February 2008, Al-Hakim Foundation has undertaken numerous activities with a view to increasing public awareness of and intolerance for this phenomenon.

9. The Foundation adopted the Islamic Day Against Violence Against Women initiative that was launched by the late Iraqi leader Mr. Abdulaziz Al-Hakim in January 2009, believing that it constitutes significant, fundamental support for Iraqi, regional and international efforts in that regard. Confronting violence against women is both a religious duty and a humanitarian issue. Because we believe that supporting and building on this initiative will pull the rug from under the feet of extremists and those who commit violence in the name of religion, we call on all the relevant international organizations to support it.

10. While we heavily underline the importance of all Governments supporting and encouraging programmes to raise awareness of violence against women, we also request them to promulgate appropriate legislation and take the necessary preventive and penal measures to suppress all forms of violence and the sexual exploitation and trafficking of women, and to ensure that appropriate monitoring mechanisms guarantee that such legislation is strictly applied.

11. We commend the international community for all the ways in which it has supported Iraqi women, who were always the first victims of the aggressive policies of the former dictatorial regime and of the practices of armed terrorist groups.

12. Notwithstanding all the progress that has been made with regard to the status of women in Iraq, women continue to face many difficulties and challenges. Nevertheless, we will maintain our very real efforts to empower women through Iraqi civil society organizations, of which Al-Hakim Foundation is one of the most prominent. The Foundation consistently aims to increase the visibility of women in all State sectors and encourage them to make an active contribution to the political process; it works with women in order to preserve the successes that have been achieved in the new Iraq.